

# Recognising Independent Arts Festivals in Australia's National Cultural Policy

A submission to the National Cultural Policy Review

**Submitted by:** National Fringe Festivals Alliance (NFFA): Adelaide Fringe Festival, Darwin Fringe Festival, FRINGE WORLD Festival Perth, Melbourne Fringe Festival, and Sydney Fringe Festival.

The five festivals named above operate collectively as the Inaugural National Fringe Festivals Alliance. This joint submission is accompanied by aligned individual responses from each member festival.

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## Revive Pillar Keys



**Pillar 1** | First Nations First



**Pillar 2** | A Place for Every Story



**Pillar 3** | Centrality of the Artist



**Pillar 4** | Strong Cultural Infrastructure



**Pillar 5** | Engaging the Audience

# Executive Summary

Australia has accidentally built one of the world's most significant networks of independent open-access festivals without federal policy recognition. The network engages millions of audiences each year, supports tens of thousands of jobs across the cultural and creative industries, drives hundreds of millions of dollars in annual economic impact, and attracts visitors from across Australia and internationally. It is, in every meaningful sense, national cultural infrastructure.

Australia's independent festivals return between \$30 and \$59 in economic impact for every \$1 of public investment, a remarkable return profile.

This submission proposes the establishment of a National Independent Festivals Framework within the next phase of REVIVE, with the National Fringe Festivals Alliance - Adelaide Fringe, FRINGE WORLD Perth, Sydney Fringe, Melbourne Fringe, and Darwin Fringe - as the inaugural cohort. The Alliance proposes a \$25 million four-year program, reviewed at two years, comprising four targeted funding mechanisms covering creation and presentation, touring and mobility, sector capacity and investment, and international connections. The infrastructure exists, the audience exists, and the artist demand exists. What is missing is federal recognition that matches the geography of an ecosystem that has, until now, been built without one.

## 1. Context

Australia's National Cultural Policy - REVIVE - recognises the central role of artists, creative workers, and cultural institutions in shaping the nation's identity and economic future. The federal government has established several specific mechanisms that recognise the role of festivals in Australian cultural life:

- **Festivals Australia**, administered through the Office for the Arts, supports arts projects at festivals and community events in regional and remote Australia, with \$1.4 million provided each year over two funding rounds.
- **Revive Live**, the federal program announced through the National Cultural Policy with a commitment of \$25 million over two years from 2025–26, supports established live music venues and contemporary music festivals.
- **The Major Festivals Initiative**, administered by the Confederation of Australian International Arts Festivals with Creative Australia, provides \$1.55 million annually to commission new Australian work for the seven major State and Territory international curated festivals.

These mechanisms each address an important category of festival activity. Together they leave one major part of Australia's festival ecosystem entirely outside federal cultural policy: the network of major open-access independent festivals, Australia's largest platforms for emerging and independent artists, the most accessible large-scale cultural participation events in many cities, the largest single source of seasonal employment for the independent arts workforce, and among the highest-performing cultural tourism assets in the country. This submission proposes that the next phase of REVIVE address that omission.

## 2. The Independent Festivals Sector

Australia's independent festivals operate under a structural model that distinguishes them from every other recognised category in cultural policy. They are artist-led rather than institution-led. They prioritise open access and low barriers to participation. They sit on top of an ecology of independent venues and small production companies rather than within major institutional infrastructure. They operate at scale - millions of audiences, thousands of artists - with operating budgets that are a fraction of those of comparable curated festivals.

Australia's major Fringe festivals are the most developed expression of this model. Operating under open-access registration, they allow any artist to register, any venue to participate, and any work meeting baseline conditions to find an audience. This model lowers barriers to entry, creates entrepreneurial pathways for independent creatives, surfaces work that no curated platform could collectively present, and connects audiences with diverse stories and forms. Federal recognition of the open-access model is the single most distinctive contribution independent festivals can make to REVIVE's second pillar.

Independent festivals already host substantial First Nations programming across the network, with bursaries, dedicated curatorial pathways, and adherence to ICIP protocols supporting self-determined cultural practice. The combination of open-access models with formal First Nations programming structures provides a distinctive vehicle for First Nations creative leadership at scale.

For thousands of Australian artists each year, independent festivals are the first professional stage of a career pathway. They function simultaneously as creative incubators, touring marketplaces, professional development platforms, employment generators, and cultural tourism assets. Especially for a lot of young people growing up in Australia, exposure to the arts through Fringe is a common, an aspect of audience development that results in career pathways through school engagement programs.

For tens of thousands of arts workers each year, the festival network is where careers in the cultural sector begin, develop, and sustain themselves:

- Producers move between projects and festivals to develop their craft and accumulate the credits needed for sustained careers
- Technicians, designers, and production crew find consistent skilled employment across the festival calendar

- Marketers, programmers, ticketing managers, and operations staff build sectoral expertise the broader cultural industry depends on
- Front-of-house, hospitality, and venue staff receive significant seasonal employment uplift, particularly in entry-level and casual roles

Independent festivals are democratic by design, anti-gatekeeping, and deliver federal policy outcomes - artist development, audience reach, regional engagement, cultural tourism, workforce development - at a scale and unit cost no other vehicle achieves. They are a different category of cultural infrastructure, not curated festivals operating at a smaller scale, and the policy framework has not yet engaged with that distinction.

### 3. A Federal Responsibility Gap

Major independent festivals are not local cultural events that happen to operate at scale. They are nationally networked cultural infrastructure whose artists, audiences, touring pathways, and economic impact span every level of government. They are currently funded almost exclusively at state, territory, and local levels, demonstrating a structural mismatch between the scale of the ecosystem and the level of government resourcing it. This mismatch produces two outcomes that only federal policy can address.

- **State and territory frameworks cannot resource a national network.** Each festival depends on a single state or territory funding body operating within a constrained jurisdictional remit. When a single state funding decision moves adversely, it destabilises a festival contributing nationally. No state government's mandate extends to protecting that national function. This is, by definition, a federal responsibility gap.
- **The artist ecosystem is national, not jurisdictional.** An independent artist may premiere at Sydney Fringe, develop the work at Melbourne Fringe, tour it to Adelaide Fringe and FRINGE WORLD Perth, take it regional with Darwin Fringe and use these credits to access international touring at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. This is the actual career pathway of contemporary Australian independent artists. No state framework can recognise or resource this pathway, because it crosses every jurisdictional boundary by design. Only federal investment matches the geography of the ecosystem.

State-level resourcing is vulnerable to contraction at precisely the moment audience demand and artist participation are expanding. Federal intervention now stabilises an existing world-leading ecosystem; delayed action risks dismantling infrastructure that took decades to build and cannot be reconstructed at comparable cost.

## 4. A National Independent Festivals Framework

The National Fringe Festivals Alliance seeks the inclusion of a National Independent Festivals Framework within the next phase of REVIVE. Such recognition formalises independent festivals as a distinct category of national cultural infrastructure, establishes coordinating governance for a sector that currently operates without it, and integrates the federal portfolios that already touch independent festival activity. This is, first and foremost, an infrastructure recognition. The funding mechanisms that would deliver it sit beneath that recognition, not in place of it.

Recognition would deliver five outcomes:

- **Recognise independent festivals as national cultural infrastructure.** Formal acknowledgment in REVIVE's next phase that major independent festivals constitute a distinct category of cultural platform delivering federal policy outcomes at scale.
- **Codify the open-access model.** Federal recognition of the open-access registration model as a defining feature of cultural infrastructure worth protection: democratic by design, anti-gatekeeping, and demonstrably effective at surfacing diverse voices.
- **Establish coordinating governance.** A National Independent Festivals Council, convened under Creative Australia, with representation from each Alliance member and relevant federal agencies. The Council coordinates national initiatives, shares data and standards, and serves as the federal government's single point of engagement with the sector.
- **Connect federal portfolios.** Independent festivals already deliver outcomes touching the Office for the Arts, Creative Australia, Tourism Australia, and DITRDCA. A coordinating framework integrates these portfolio interests rather than fragmenting them across siloed funding lines.
- **Align with Creative Australia's international strategy.** The Framework integrates explicitly with Creative Australia's International Engagement Strategy and existing international funding programs, positioning the domestic independent festival network as the talent development pipeline that feeds federally-supported international touring.

## An extensible framework

The Framework is designed as an extensible recognition pathway rather than a closed category. While the Alliance comprises Australia's five major Fringe festivals as the inaugural cohort - the most developed expression of the model - other major open-access and artist-led festivals share the structural characteristics that warrant the Framework's recognition. Festivals such as the Melbourne International Comedy Festival, Midsumma Festival, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival, North Australian Festival of Arts Townsville, Melt Festival, Brisbane and Adelaide's Feast Festival represent the broader independent festival sector to which the Framework can extend over time, with subsequent cohort criteria developed through the National Independent Festivals Council.

## Delivery: a four-year, \$25 million program

The Framework's recognition is operationalised through four targeted funds delivered over four years. Each fund addresses a specific dimension of the existing infrastructure. The two-year independent review provides government with a structured assessment point and the Alliance with a clear accountability framework.

### 1. National Artist Creation and Presentation Fund: \$10 million over four years

Direct, accessible funding for independent artists to create and present new Australian work within the festival network. The Fund prioritises emerging, independent, and underrepresented artists; supports self-determined creative practice; and is delivered in partnership with the festivals to enable low-barrier, timely funding processes. A proportion of disbursements would be tied to mandatory artist fee floors aligned with MEAA Live Performance Award rates, directly delivering REVIVE's fair-pay commitments.

Within the Fund, dedicated streams support First Nations artists, supported by First Nations curators, producers and advisors. Fund also resources independent producer capacity building administered through the network.

### 2. National Touring and Mobility Fund: \$7 million over four years

A national initiative supporting the circulation of independent work across Australia's festival network. The festival calendar already constitutes a near year-round national touring circuit:

- FRINGE WORLD Perth (21 January – 15 February)
- Adelaide Fringe (20 February – 22 March)
- Darwin Fringe (17 – 26 July)
- Sydney Fringe (1 – 30 September)
- Melbourne Fringe (29 September – 18 October)

Perth flows directly into Adelaide. Sydney flows directly into Melbourne. Darwin anchors mid-year. The result is an existing national infrastructure for the development, presentation, and circulation of independent Australian work. At present, the cost of touring between festivals including flights, freight, accommodation, additional production, falls almost entirely on individual artists, locking out the very emerging, regional, and underrepresented artists REVIVE prioritises.

The Fund converts an accidental national circuit into a deliberate, equitably accessible one, unlocking interstate mobility for hundreds of independent artists per cycle. It supports a Cross-Festival Artist Residency Network bridging creation and presentation funding, and invests in sustainable touring infrastructure: shared technical equipment pools, reusable set and costume libraries, and rail-subsidy schemes for interstate touring.

A National First Nations Festivals Pathway operates within the Fund: a coordinated commission-to-tour model in which First Nations artists develop work at their home festival and tour through the network with built-in fees, mentorship, and ICIP protocols.

### **3. National Sector Capacity and Investment Fund: \$4 million over four years**

A strategic investment to strengthen independent festivals as national cultural infrastructure. The Fund supports coordinated national initiatives across festivals; pilots innovative models of artist support, digital engagement, and audience development; advances sector-wide priorities including access, inclusion, sustainability, and audience diversity; and resources sector-wide data, evaluation, and benchmarking.

Specific investments include national accessibility standards (captioning, Auslan, audio description pools; accessible venue mapping; sensory-relaxed performance protocols), cultural protocols and safety infrastructure (cultural safety training, Elders-in-residence programs, ICIP literacy, and support for First Nations curatorial roles). The post-lockout, post-COVID independent venue crisis represents an immediate threat to the sector's sustainability that federal recognition of independent venues as cultural infrastructure can address.

### **4. International Independent Arts Connections Fund: \$4 million over four years**

A dedicated fund building international export pathways for Australian independent artists, in direct alignment with Creative Australia's International Engagement Strategy and existing international funding programs.

Australian independent festivals already feed artists into international touring, most prominently the Edinburgh Festival Fringe pathway, but this pipeline operates without coordination or federal support. The Fund would establish formal partnerships with major international festivals (leveraging existing relationships), resource inbound buyer programs and showcases, support outbound touring, and create structured pathways into

Creative Australia's existing International Engagement Fund and International Touring and Presentation Fund. This is co-investment, not duplication: it positions Australia's independent festivals as the domestic platform that amplifies the return on Creative Australia's existing international investment.

## Coordination and delivery

The National Fringe Festivals Alliance is committed to delivering this initiative with national consistency, shared standards, and coordinated evaluation, while maintaining strong local engagement with artists and communities. The partnership offers government direct pathways to thousands of independent artists, established platforms for presentation and audience connection, efficient and scalable delivery mechanisms, and existing national and international networks for cultural exchange.

## 5. National Visitor Economy Infrastructure

Australia's independent festivals are among the highest-performing cultural tourism assets in the country, with measurable, attributable economic impact at a scale that warrants federal recognition as cultural tourism infrastructure.

Adelaide Fringe 2025 generated \$197.7 million in total expenditure for South Australia, with \$144.2 million in new money to the state economy, and supported 16,128 jobs. PwC modelling shows Adelaide Fringe returning \$30 to \$40 per \$1 of state government investment. FRINGE WORLD Perth delivered \$119 million in economic impact in FY25 connecting with half a million audience members and paying \$8.34M directly to artists. Sydney Fringe has delivered \$124 million in cumulative economic impact since the launch of REVIVE in 2023, returning \$59 per \$1 of state government investment, with state government funding only 7.7 percent of total cost to deliver.

Each festival contributes a distinct function within the network: Adelaide concentrates impact across Mad March; Sydney leverages Australia's primary international visitor gateway; Perth anchors Western Australia's summer visitor economy; Melbourne activates a deep domestic audience in an established arts capital; Darwin extends the network into the Top End through providing a winter escape and the classic Australian adventure. Independent festivals stay longer in visitors' itineraries, distribute visitor activity across the calendar, and capture international cultural tourism through globally-recognised brands. The complementarity is the point: concentrated impact, international reach, seasonal dispersal, regional access and no single festival could replicate it.

■ Independent festivals collectively reach millions of audiences with average ticket prices well below comparable curated festivals. They are, in the most literal sense, the people's festivals, reaching audiences across generational and demographic lines that other cultural platforms struggle to engage.

The Alliance proposes that the Framework include a coordinating partnership with Tourism Australia and DITRDC: inclusion in international cultural tourism marketing; a nationally consistent visitor economy data and measurement framework; coordinated international export and inbound buyer programs; and recognition of independent festivals within visitor economy strategy as year-round cultural tourism infrastructure. The Alliance further proposes a federal Affordability Guarantee, federally subsidised low-income and first-timer ticketing schemes that position the network as the affordable cultural participation answer to the cost-of-living crisis.

# Fact Sheet

*All figures 2025 unless otherwise indicated.*

## Network at a glance

- Adelaide Fringe: largest arts festival in the Southern Hemisphere; second-largest Fringe globally; 65 years of operation
- FRINGE WORLD Perth: third-largest Fringe globally; 16 years of operation
- Melbourne Fringe: 44 years of operation
- Sydney Fringe: NSW's largest independent arts festival; 17 years of operation
- Darwin Fringe: Australia's most northern Fringe and is the biggest platform for emerging, independent and experimental arts in the NT; 10 years of operation

## Economic impact and direct employment

- Adelaide Fringe: \$197.7M total expenditure; \$144.2M economic impact to SA economy; 16,128 jobs supported; \$26.7M paid directly to artists and venues
- \$119M economic impact to WA economy (FY25); ~500,000 attendees; \$8.34M paid directly to artists and venues
- Sydney Fringe: \$124M cumulative economic impact since REVIVE 2023; 103,000+ attendees; 3,300+ artists; 450 events across 89 venues
- Darwin Fringe \$1million+ economic impact paying more than \$100k to artists and venues and more than \$50k to local arts workers after only 10 days.
- \$23M of direct economic activity each year, driven by over 250,000 attendees and resulting in \$2.8M+ of earnings for artists through ticket sales and commissions. This sits alongside

over \$71M of economic benefits from tourism and consumer surplus and \$29M of social value grown over a ten-year projection.

- Network total: tens of thousands of artists, producers, technicians, designers, marketers, front-of-house staff, and venue operators each year

## Return on investment

- Adelaide Fringe: \$30–\$40 per \$1 of state government investment (PwC modelling)
- Sydney Fringe: \$59 per \$1, with state government funding only 7.7% of total cost to deliver

## National coordination benefits

- Shared data and benchmarking standards
- Coordinated international cultural tourism marketing
- Integrated artist career pathways across the calendar
- Single counterparty for federal portfolios currently engaging independent festivals on a fragmented, festival-by-festival basis

## Global scale

- Australia hosts 2 of 3 of the biggest Fringe Festivals in the world
- The Australian network has no parallel outside the United Kingdom

**Australia already leads globally in independent festivals. We do not yet recognise this leadership within national cultural policy.**